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Ending a Shameful Chapter In Our History

September 20, 2011 by Patrick J. Murphy

Eric Alva's father served in Vietnam. His grandfather served in WWII and Korea. So when Eric joined the Marines at 19, he was simply following family tradition. 13 years later Eric was serving with the invasion force in Iraq. Three hours into the land war, Eric triggered a landmine. The blast ripped through him, breaking his left leg, tearing open his right arm, and destroying his right leg so badly it required amputation. He was the first Purple Heart recipient in the war with Iraq.

Like many who have fought for our nation, Eric is gay. And like the patriots before him, who Eric loved had nothing do with how well he could fire his weapon, or speak Arabic, or fly a plane. But because of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell", Eric had to lie about who he was in order to risk his life for our freedom.

I never had the honor of serving directly with Eric. He was a Marine, and I was in the Army with the 82nd Airborne. But I knew men and women like him. Good soldiers who happened to be gay. I also knew that when I was in Iraq, no one cared if you were gay or straight. Being able to jump out of a plane mattered, who you wrote home to didn't.

Because of my experience, I was not surprised most Americans believed that Don't Ask, Don't Tell was wrong. It was unfair and pointless. It ran counter to principles our nation was founded upon.

When I got to Congress in 2007, I thought repeal would be a no-brainer. I was shocked by the defeatist attitude that many of my colleagues had come to accept as normal.

"Experts" said repeal was impossible. The votes weren't there -- it was too risky politically. That didn't seem right to me. In the Army, soldiers don't use the word "can't". Certainly not the paratroopers I served with. We had a job to do, and we would get that job done, no matter what.

Luckily, I was able to join with groups like the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, Courage Campaign, the Human Rights Campaign and the Palm Center. They agreed with my assessment, and had been fighting to end Don't Ask, Don't Tell long before I got there.

Together, we showed that the policy was more than discriminatory. It hurt our military readiness by tossing out good soldiers for no reason. We were able to turn the tide in Washington by telling the stories of heroes who wanted nothing more than to fight for our country.

Heroes like Eric Alva. Or Lt. Col. Victor Fehrenbach, an 20-year Air Force pilot who flew 88 combat missions and earned 9 air medals, including one for heroism. Victor was targeted under Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and his unit was forced to deploy without him while he sat at a desk. Their stories are just a few of many featured in "The Strange History of Don't Ask, Don't Tell," which premieres on HBO tonight at 8 PM. Hearing from them will remind you why this day is so important.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell ended today. But as we celebrate this victory -- and it is a tremendous victory -- we must remember that the fight is not over. Inequality and discrimination are still prevalent across our country. In my home state of Pennsylvania, it's legal to fire someone for being gay. That's just wrong, and it is part of why I'm running for Attorney General here. I believe in living by the rules, but there needs to be one set of rules for everyone. And I don't care how hard it

is, I won't stop fighting till we get there, but I can't do it alone. Just like with repealing DADT, it's going to take thousands upon thousands of people standing up and making their voices heard to make it happen -- I hope you will join me today by going to www.onerulebook.com.

This morning started the same as they all do for Eric Alva. For the most part he's adjusted to life after such a catastrophic injury. Still has his regimen, still wakes up too early.

But this morning was different. This morning, Eric got something back. Obviously, he is still missing his leg. He still has the pain. But he has something else. He has his honor and validation that he helped right a wrong -- finally ending a shameful chapter of our nation's history.